Developing Materials for the Study of Literature

By Susanne Bock

In this article, a number of principles are presented as a framework for the development of self-access materials that introduce students to ways of reading and appreciating literary texts. The principles draw on the interactive view of ESL reading and research into reading strategies, theories of stylistic analysis and their relevance to the teaching of literature and research in the field of self-access instruction, and the development of independent learners.

The article arises out of research conducted by the author into the development of materials for the study of literature by advanced ESL students. This research was prompted by the author's experience of teaching on a programme for ESL students in the English Department at the University of Cape Town. The programme, Foundation English, is a tutoring scheme that runs concurrently with English I. The students involved meet their tutors for individual weekly tutorials in which they cover work relating to the English I course. In the experience of the author this was often frustratingly insufficient time to adequately address some of the "gaps" in the students' knowledge of literature and literary criticism. The development of "bridging" materials that students could work through on their own was therefore perceived as a possible solution. The aim of the materials would be to enhance their reading skills and appreciation of literature and to guide them through the process of analysing a text and preparing to write a critical analysis, the dominant exercise for assessment in the English Department.

This section is an attempt to understand how one reads and makes sense of texts and how one can improve one's reading efficiency, as first steps towards designing exercises that aid the process of comprehension and help students use better reading strategies.

Insights from Research into Reading Comprehension

The interactive-compensatory model of reading fluency (Stanovich 1980) provides useful insights for teachers of literature. This model is "interactive" in that it assumes that the reader makes sense of what s/he reads by (1) decoding the linguistic items on the page ("bottom-up processing") and (2) relating this information to what s/he already knows about the world ("top-down processing"). This "background" information is acquired through one's experience of the world and is stored in abstract knowledge structures known as "schemata" (Adams and Collins 1979).

The model is "compensatory" in the sense "that a deficit in any knowledge source results in a heavier reliance on other knowledge sources" (Stanovich 1980:63). In other words, if a reader's linguistic knowledge is weak at any one point, s/he will compensate by drawing on background knowledge, and vice versa. The model assumes that top-down and bottom-up processes are equally important.

During efficient reading, incoming textual data is processed (bottom-up), which activates appropriate higher level schemata (top-down) against which the reader tries to give the text a coherent interpretation. The reader makes predictions on the basis of these top-down processes and then searches the text for confirmation or rejection of these partially satisfied higher order schemata. What the reader brings to the text is just as important as what s/he finds there. "In this view, reading is regarded not as a reaction to a text but as interaction between the writer and the reader mediated through the text" (Widdowson 1979:174).

The interactive-compensatory model provides useful insights for teachers of literature, and the principles attempt to "capture" these insights.

PRINCIPLES:

1. Activate existing background knowledge ("content schemata") by relating the content of the text to the students' own cultural experiences. Exercise: Previewing, in which students reflect on and discuss what they already know about a topic that is of importance in the text to be studied. This encourages them to relate what they read to what is already familiar and known.

2. Encourage prediction. Predicting (allowing students to formulate hypotheses about the text before reading commences) is a further way of encouraging students to utilise what background information they possess and arousing their interest in the development of the story. It does not matter if their predictions are incorrect-the important thing is that they will be alert to what does follow to see whether it matches their expectations or not.

3. Fill in background knowledge where it is missing through explicit presentation of the cultural, historical, and/or social context of the text.

4. Make explicit, if necessary, the text's discourse genre ("formal schemata"). This may be the literary genre (novel, play, poem) to which the text belongs or the discourse structure of the text (e.g., the organisation of information in an argumentative as opposed to a descriptive text).

5. Assist word and sentence-level comprehension through vocabulary exercises, glossaries.

6. "Don't lose the wood for the trees." In the light of research on text coherence (Carrell 1985) teachers of literature should be careful that they do not fail to "put the text together again" once bits of it have been discussed and analysed. Exercises such as the construction of plot diagrams or graphs showing the protagonists' rise and fall are ways of achieving this.

Insights from Research on Reading Strategies

In the last decade there has been a growth in research on reading strategies. Various attempts have been made to define exactly which strategies are used by "good" and "bad" readers. The list below is a compilation from Hosenfeld (1977), Hosenfeld et al. (1981), Chamot and Kupper (1989), Rubin (1981) quoted in Dickinson (1987), and Carrell (1989).

Good readers:

1. decide on a reading purpose-for example, following the development of a specific character in relation to the plot line;

2. choose a reading approach (i.e., skimming, scanning, reading for detail) appropriate to the given text and their purpose in reading it;

3. read the title, look at illustrations, etc., and make inferences about the meaning;

4. predict how the story will develop;

5. check these predictions against what they read, and modify or reformulate predictions;

6. use their knowledge of the world;

7. adopt "fuzzy processing" (Rubin 1981) in that they tolerate vague meaning until they can clarify it more specifically by skipping unknown words and taking chances to guess at meaning;

8. use a variety of context clues (e.g., preceding and succeeding sentences and paragraphs) to guess at unknown words and expressions;

9. use dictionaries sparingly;

10. summarise as they read along;

11. organise the information in memory in some form so as to aid recall through the taking of notes, construction of diagrams and semantic mappings, etc.

According to Hosenfeld (1977), the less successful reader:

1. loses the meaning of sentences as soon as s/he decodes them;

2. reads (translates) in short phrases;

3. seldom skips words as unimportant since s/he views words as "equal" in terms of their contribution to total phrase meaning;

4. has a negative self-concept as a reader.

The literature on the reading strategies of "good" and "bad" readers offers further insights for the teacher of literature (and materials writer) because it identifies strategies that can be explicitly taught or brought to the attention of readers.

PRINCIPLES:

1. Be explicit about the reason for an exercise so as to encourage students to read with a purpose, and to assist them in gaining conscious control over the reading strategy that the exercise requires them to use.

2. Include instructions that offer either useful hints or good working procedures: e.g., "Read the poem several times, aloud as well as silently, so that you can hear how the sounds pattern," "Look up those words the meaning of which you cannot guess from the context."

3. Include exercises that build comprehension skills. Exercises may range from those that ask students simply to mark a statement true or false to those that require them to identify the inferences made by the text.

4. Help students make explicit the inferences that are implicit in the text and to which the writer has assumed his/her readers will have access. Draw attention to the hierarchical nature of actions, states, or events by, for example, requiring students to differentiate main from secondary points, rank alternative interpretations, summarise or paraphrase.

5. Encourage readers to summarise as they go along: e.g., An exercise that asks students to "Give the paragraph/chapter a heading" requires them to identify a single main point. Drawing diagrams, flow charts, or tables may help students to organise the events in a story in a visual form that shows the relationship between events (chronological, cause and effect, etc.).

Approaches to Literary Analysis and Their Relevance to the Teaching of Literature

At English I level, students are expected to: (1) read a number of texts, (2) assimilate what they read, (3) write essays or critical analyses on these texts, and (4) be fairly independent of the lecturers and tutors both in terms of organising their study and in developing their ideas.

The course places high demands upon the students' proficiency in English. They use English to learn about English, and their linguistic problems are therefore a double handicap.

The most common task for assessment in the English Department is the writing of a critical analysis on a poem or passage from a novel or play. Traditional approaches to literature teaching at this level depend, for this response, on the students' "native-speaker intuition" and "feel for the language." However, many second-language students, and indeed a number of first-language students, do not have this intuition and they need guidance in developing it.

Perhaps the single most important consideration that helped mould my approach in the design of these materials has been the recognition that students need to be shown (often quite explicitly) how to do a critical analysis. In developing an approach, I have tried, therefore, to show students how one can analyse a text in a systematic and linguistic way-in a way that does not rely on the developed intuitive response and sensitivity to language that the "practical criticism" approach assumes.

The approach I have adopted is predominantly a stylistic one. Linguists such as Jakobson (1961) and Widdowson (1975) argue that what gives poetry its distinctive character is the patterning of language (e.g., the repetition of sounds, words, and sentences to create a particular effect). Widdowson further argues that what makes literary discourse distinctive is that it is often deviant in terms of standard English grammar. He suggests that students need to be alerted to these deviations and that this is best achieved through the comparison of literary discourse with instances of conventional writing. Through such a comparison, students may discover those features of language that characterise literary discourse.

Stylistics, as an approach, has been criticised (Gower 1986) for treating literature as a "verbal artifact" that can be "clinically" analysed and for ignoring the emotional effect that reading has on one. This criticism is a necessary reminder of the need to (1) "reconstruct" the text after an analysis so as to "put together again" an overall sense of the meaning, and (2) allow students to make some sort of personal response to the text.

Materials for self-instruction need to be suitable for private study. The tasks should assume a single reader and, as far as possible, involve questions to which answer keys can be written. Although some of the questions in the bridging materials are "for discussion with your tutor," particularly those involving interpretation, an answer key accompanies most of the questions. Stylistic- and language-based questions are easier to "key" than more personal response-based ones, and this is a further justification for the adoption of a predominantly stylistic approach in the bridging materials.

PRINCIPLES:

From this general discussion, three principles can be extracted:

1. Meaning is created in the interaction between reader and text. Therefore, engage students' response to and interaction with the text. (This would also activate the students' top-down processes.) Choice of text is particularly important in this regard.

2. Literature is a discourse with its own rules and conventions of language use. Develop sensitivity in the students to the way in which literary language is distinctive by, for example, comparing examples of literary with non-literary description.

3. Stylistics is a systematic way of exploring how the language in the text patterns to create particular meanings and effects. Design exercises that alert students to the stylistic choices and the patterning of features in the text, and then encourage them to explore the effect of these choices on the meaning.

How exactly one achieves these aims depends on the text and the imagination of the materials writer.

Learner Training and Self-Access Materials

The use of materials designed for self-access is one of the ways in which we can "train" students to take responsibility for their own learning and help them develop confidence in their own ideas and in their ability to work independently of a tutor. In a country like South Africa, where the education system has attempted to "coerce and control," students need to be encouraged to be critical and independent thinkers and to set their own learning goals.

One of the intended outcomes of such a mode of learning is that learners should acquire good learning strategies and so become more autonomous and self-directed. In addition to the reading strategies listed above, other strategies of a more general nature may help students with the successful completion of the English I course. These strategies may relate to: (1) setting objectives, (2) planning stages, (3) monitoring progression through those stages, and (4) self-assessing the achievement of the task.

The bridging materials should therefore include advice on how to accomplish a task. For example,

1. how to do the exercises
2. how and when to use reference materials
3. how to plan and pace work
4. how to motivate oneself
5. how to self-assess

Fundamental to the success of any learning activity is the motivation of the learner. Because the Foundation English program is supplementary to English I and hence not credited towards university degrees, the students' motivation must be engaged and maintained. In order to be as motivating as possible, Foundation English materials should: (1) clearly state their aims and objectives, (2) keep the material's content as close as possible to the English I course content and explicitly state the relevance of the tasks to the English I course, (3) encourage learners to set their own working schedules and goals, and (4) be accompanied by self-assessment keys so that students can monitor their own learning.

In addition, motivation will be enhanced by professionally presented and well laid out materials. The size of the unit is also important. The student should be able to complete one activity within a reasonable time limit. Neither the preliminary tasks nor the instructions should be so bulky as to deter the student from doing/reading them altogether.

Derek Rowntree (1986) has written an extremely clear and useful handbook for materials writers, called Teaching through Self-Instruction. He identifies "active learning" as the most distinctive feature of his self-instructional materials and emphasises the need to vary not only the activities (questions, tasks, and exercises) but the layout and format as well. He stresses the need to keep the learners you are writing for in mind and offers the following guidelines for materials writers (1986:82-83):

1. Help the learners find their way into and around your subject, by-passing or repeating sections where appropriate.

2. Tell them what they need to be able to do before tackling the material.

3. Make clear what they should be able to do on completion of the material (e.g., in terms of objectives).

4. Advise them on how to tackle the work (e.g., how much time to allow for different sections, how to plan for an assignment, etc.).

5. Explain the subject matter in such a way that learners can relate it to what they know already.

6. Encourage them sufficiently to make whatever effort is needed in coming to grips with the subject.

7. Engage them in exercises and activities that cause them to work with the subject matter, rather than merely reading about it.

8. Give the learners feedback on these exercises and activities, enabling them to judge for themselves whether they are learning successfully.

9. Help them to sum up their learning at the end of the lesson.

PRINCIPLES:

From the above we can extract five basic principles:

1. Independent and self-directed learning. Encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to have confidence in their own abilities and ideas.

2. Clarity. Ensure clarity of goals and working procedure. Tasks should be clearly explained with worked examples if necessary. The language in which the materials are written should be comprehensible, explicit, and suited to the level of the student.

3. Relevance. Keep content as close as possible to the English I syllabus and state explicitly the relevance of the tasks to the English I course.

4. Reinforcement. Give students a sense of progress and achievement by providing answer keys and encouraging them to evaluate and assess their own responses.

5. Presentation. Materials should be professionally presented and well organised.

The aim, then, of self-access materials is to *support* learners and provide them with the kind of help, advice, and encouragement normally given by the tutor.

Conclusion

Many other questions play a role in the design of such bridging materials. Which texts do you choose? Should the individual units of material follow a particular sequence, and if so, what sequence? This article cannot attempt to address all the issues. Many can only be decided upon once the context in which the materials are to be used is known.

The appendix contains a unit of the materials I have written for my Foundation English students. It illustrates some of the principles that I have outlined in this article. Obviously, some of the principles (such as "predicting" the story) are not appropriate for this particular text. I should also mention that this unit is envisaged as the first in a series that introduces students to concepts and procedures in literary analysis. Later units can be more open-ended and lead into a full-length critical analysis.

Many of the concepts and terms are fully explained only in the Answer Key (e.g., metaphor, connotations, alliteration), so as not to interrupt the process of exploring the poem. I have not included the Answer Key in this article because of space constraints.

I acknowledge that the materials are limited in that they are materials and cannot replace the dynamics of group discussion. It is therefore important to stress that they are designed to be used ideally in conjunction with a tutor or group. The students should come to the tutorials prepared for discussions after having thought about the text and completed the unit.

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